

## **Editorial: Foster Care and Development**

*Daniela Reimer, Dirk Schäfer, Judith Pierlings, Klaus Wolf, University of Siegen*

Foster Care Research in Europe is extremely diverse. Traditionally, it has been strongly informed by psychology, especially attachment theory, as well as by therapeutic initiatives and psychopathology. Furthermore, it has been influenced by ideological discussions about the status of foster families, with a varying emphasis on this in different countries (Cameron et al. 2015).

Until recently, attachment theory was widely accepted as the principal general theory underpinning the provision of foster care (e.g. Kindler et al. 2010; Schofield et al. 2000; David 2004). But over the last few years, the focus has changed in response to concerns that this perspective, although important, is somewhat limited and other theories need to be considered (Cameron et al. 2015; Wolf 2015). The Foster Care Research Network is leading the way on this and is nurturing an interest in other frameworks, including those based on pedagogy, social work and social science. In several countries, there is a distinct move towards qualitative research that uses hermeneutic methods alongside more established psychological ones (Foster Care Research Network 2013). This shift towards a research programme informed by social work issues represents a change from a perspective that individualises the problems of those involved in foster care to one that incorporates discourse about inequalities, poverty and the role of child protection in Western societies.

Foster Care is not only diverse in its practice but also an evolving service. Indeed, it can be said that it is infused by ‘development’: children grow up while in care, those leaving continue their life journeys and the provision has a future as well as a history.

In September 2015, the 8th International Foster Care Research Network Conference was held at the University of Siegen, Germany. Over 80 researchers from Europe and beyond attended. The conference was entitled “Development“ and aimed to discuss this as it is affecting all aspects of foster care - whether the young people, their carers or the service itself.

The seven papers in this Special Issue are based on presentations to the Conference.

In the first, *June Thoburn* reviews current findings from European foster care research. From her long-standing experience, she gives a broad overview of present knowledge about the factors that make foster care successful, affect children’s well-being and meet the needs of carers and supporting services. In addition, she gives an insight into the range of research methods that have been employed and identifies gaps and challenges with regard to international research.

In the second article, *Klaus Wolf* explains why an explicit social pedagogy perspective is needed to advance foster care research and explains how it is different from orthodox clinical approaches. After outlining the structural characteristics of child development, he highlights

the central features of a research strategy based on social pedagogic theory and uses this as a foundation for the construction of a general theory.

By focusing on ‘transracial’ fostering and adoption, *Ann Phoenix’s* paper discusses an issue that has been salient since the 1970s and is becoming even more so today in the light of global migration and refugee movements. She points out that diversity, difference and belonging are intrinsic issues in the management of foster placements, but little is known about how these influence the effectiveness of practice and the experiences of those involved. To expand our understanding, she introduces the theoretical concepts of intersectionality, racialisation, belonging and identities and links these to a more sensitive appreciation of fostering in multicultural and ‘transracial’ contexts. She then presents findings from a study that applied these concepts to adults growing up in visibly ethnically different households and discusses their implications for those involved.

*Daniela Reimer* presents a paper on normality constructions and normality balances among foster children. She points out the especial meaning of normality for foster children and shares results from a qualitative, biographical study with young adults who have been in care. She uses her data to develop a theoretical model to understand normality constructions and balances and from this derives an analytic typology. The closing section illustrates the benefits of using this approach for foster care research and professional practice.

In considering the question of contact between foster children and birth parents, *Carmen Hofer-Temmel and Christina Rothdeutsch-Granter* reconsider a challenging and enduring practice issue. The paper aims to contribute to understanding this problem by describing how direct contacts between birth families and children in long-term foster care are experienced by all those involved. The authors present findings from a multi-perspective qualitative study based on the theoretical “spin top model” and outline the options available to professionals when determining and supporting children’s family links.

Subsequently *Roger Bullock* introduces a method designed to plan the amount and nature of foster care in a city or region. It has been used in several countries to facilitate the systemic design of services. The model is based on the premise that the services provided should meet the needs of their users and the task is to achieve an effective match. A case study introduces the steps in applying the model and demonstrates its potential for service development.

Finally *Cinzia Canali’s* paper discusses findings from a study of the experience and motivation of foster parents. She frames this with background information on foster care in Italy and introduces three sets of results: the profiles and motivations of foster families, connections with local services and an evaluation of the care experience and its impact on the lives of foster families. She concludes with concrete ideas for the development of foster care and the role of professionals.

This Special Issue has two reference points: international foster care research and social pedagogy

As explained earlier, foster care research in Anglophone countries, although extensive, has tended to follow a predominantly clinical orientation influenced by perspectives derived from psychopathology and models of normative development. Similarly, the research methods employed tend to be those used in studies of psychotherapy, child and adolescent psychiatry, special education and orthopedagogy. From this standpoint, foster children are perceived as

intrinsically disordered and hope is pinned on treatment programmes that transform them through therapy. Sometimes, the foster homes themselves are considered as therapeutic contexts under the direction of professional therapists.

Parallel to this tradition is an extensive body of research into professional practice and the work and functioning of services. This is more diverse in its methods and theoretical frameworks than the research described above and usually takes a highly pragmatic approach to the selection of topics for study and ways of disseminating findings.

In addition to all of this, there is a much smaller tranche of research that works systematically with qualitative methods, adopts hermeneutic approaches, studies the processes involved in the construction and understanding of sense, seeks to develop interdependent theoretical models as opposed to linear effect ones, and pays full attention to the historical and social contexts in which services operate and children develop. At present, this type of investigation is less influential and is little developed as a self-contained, alternative paradigm. Also the possibilities of publishing the emerging papers in high status journals are limited and in most countries funding for such work is scarce.

This Special Edition, therefore, seeks to increase the visibility of what we call social pedagogy foster care research. The individual articles may differ in their theoretical and methodical orientations but they are selected and structured to create connections that go beyond narrow clinical perspectives and open avenues to other branches of knowledge and research areas.

The second reference frame highlighted is the significance of social pedagogy. Here, the focus is not on foster children or families, but on the wider field of social pedagogy theory and associated research. The name “Centre for Understanding of Social Pedagogy“ at the Thomas Coram Research Unit in London foreshadows this direction and raises two key questions: what are the specifics of social pedagogy and what is the particular nature of its research? Using examples from foster care studies, we provide some preliminary answers. These – whether in German-speaking or Anglophone areas – are inevitably somewhat tentative but by inching our way forward, encouraging discussion and creating connections to social pedagogy research in other areas, such as education, we are laying the foundations for coherent and radical theoretical development.

Readers may respond to these suggestions differently. They may consider the papers in terms of the two reference frames highlighted and revise their thinking or be motivated to explore other perspectives; but our hope is that whatever happens, this publication will stimulate new thinking and discussions will be continued.

Siegen, December 2017

**Author’s address:**

Daniela Reimer  
Research Associate at the University of Siegen  
Adolf -Reichweinstr.2  
57068 Siegen  
Germany  
E-Mail: [daniela.reimer@uni-siegen.de](mailto:daniela.reimer@uni-siegen.de)

Dirk Schäfer, Dipl. Pädagoge, Dipl. Sozialpädagoge  
University of Siegen, Faculty II  
Department Erziehungswissenschaft • Psychologie  
Adolf-Reichwein-Str. 2  
57068 Siegen  
Germany

Judith Pierlings, Dipl. Pädagogin, Dipl. Sozialpädagogin  
University of Siegen, Faculty II  
Department Erziehungswissenschaft • Psychologie  
Adolf-Reichwein-Str. 2  
57068 Siegen  
Germany

Klaus Wolf  
University of Siegen  
Adolf-Reichwein-Str. 2  
57068 Siegen  
Germany  
[klaus.wolf@uni-siegen.de](mailto:klaus.wolf@uni-siegen.de)